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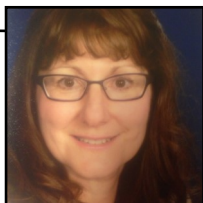
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A newsletter of the Montana Association of Teachers of English Language Arts  
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## HUMANITIES AWARD

# Governor Honors Former MATELA President Dottie Susag, Five Others, in Capitol Ceremony

By **KATIE KOTYNSKI**



**S** Governor Bullock honored MATELA member Dorothea (Dottie) Susag for her work in the humanities along with five other distinguished Montanans: Chere Jiusto, John Murray, Hal and Shei-

la Stearns, and Karen Aspegv Stevenson.

"We are lucky to have such wonderful individuals across the state who ensure that Montanans have access to and engage in art, literature and our unique cultural heritage," Bullock said.

"Congratulations to these awardees for devoting decades of their lives to supporting and promoting the humanities."

The public ceremony took place Jan. 26 at 3 p.m. in the Capitol Rotunda in Helena, followed

by a banquet in the Radisson Colonial Hotel in which Michael Punke, author of "The Revenant," praised the candidates for their work.

Susag and the other honorees were given a medal and a hand-crafted pottery mug created by artist Michelle Summers from the Archie Bray Foundation.

Susag is former president, first and second vice president as well as Indian Ed Liaison for OPI. During her speech, Susag named many individuals and groups, saying the award honored them.

"This award today is the honor of hundreds who have believed in the critical work we do together. For those of you who have shared your stories and have given me permission to share them with children, this is your honor," Susag said in her thank-you speech.

"For my Heritage Project teaching colleagues and leaders who

have joined me in this arduous but fulfilling and most important adventure, both in Simms, and through the Montana Historical Society, this is your honor. For my students who have trusted me when I've said, 'I am here with you as you do your research into your community,' this is your honor," she continued.

An award-winning, retired educator from Simms, Susag has devoted her life to studying Native American literature and history and promoting Indian Education for All (IEFA).

One of her latest efforts included a stint as curriculum specialist for the Office of Public Instruction, in which she wrote units to help teachers incorporate Indian literature and history into their curricular units. One result of this partnership with OPI was the publishing of her latest book: "Birthright: Born to Poetry, a Collection of Montana Indian Poetry." The project collected writings from one poet in every Montana tribal community. In addition, Susag recorded the poets reading their work, which is available on the website:

[opi.mt.gov/streamer/IndianEd/Birthright/\\_deploy/Index.html#/playlist1/local1](http://opi.mt.gov/streamer/IndianEd/Birthright/_deploy/Index.html#/playlist1/local1)

**DOROTHEA (DOTTIE) SUSAG**  
2017 GOVERNOR'S HUMANITIES  
AWARDS HONOREE

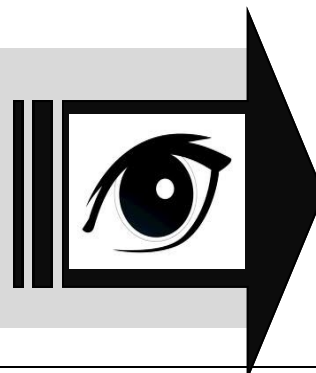
"Each of us owns the right to tell our story, and each of us has the obligation to listen to the stories others tell, especially when they conflict with the stories we might tell about them."



See AWARD Page 2

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## AWARD from Page 1

## Susag's Work with IEFA Earns Praise at Awards Ceremony

"This work was an elaborate collaborative effort with American Indian poets to produce a work that could be used in classrooms to bring IEFA to life for all students," Susag said.

"It (The Birthright project) gives immediate access to professional tribal poets for all people, schools especially. Teachers can't get this type of poetry in textbooks. How powerful these voices are."

Another venture that earns Susag praise is the Heritage Project, which empowers students to research within their own community.

"We encourage the students to use primary sources and conduct interviews of local people. It's a way for students to give back to their local communities," Susag said.

In addition to writing several books, Susag has authored many journal articles.

Her awards include honorable mention National Council of Teachers of English Intellectual Freedom Award, Montana Teachers of English Language Arts (MATELA) teacher of the year. She also received the Montana Intellectual Freedom Award.

Although retired, Susag has not stopped working. Currently, she is a Humanities-in-the-Schools speaker, working with K-16 teachers across the state in the areas of Native American literature and history, poetry, critical literacy, community history and writing.



Photos by Katie Kotynski

Dottie Susag stands in front of the Humanities Montana banner after receiving her award from Gov. Bullock in the Capitol Rotunda. She received a medal and a pottery piece from a local artist.

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www.matelamt.com

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## MEA-AFT CONVENTION

# Plans Shape Up for October Conference

By Sue Stolp

Get ready for October's MEA-AFT Conference in Missoula, Oct. 18-20. In preparation, MATELA has reserved a block of rooms at the **Hilton Garden Inn** for the evenings of Oct. 18 and 19.

Please make your reservations early and mention MATELA when registering. The cost per night is \$139 plus seven-percent lodging tax. Make your reservations online at [www.missoula.stayhigicom](http://www.missoula.stayhigicom) or by calling the hotel directly at 406-532-5300. The cut-off date for the block rate is Sept. 18.

## Keynote Speakers

Tim Tingle, Choctaw Author, Speaker and Storyteller, will be MATELA's keynoter. Tingle has written books for young children, upper elementary grades, and young adults.

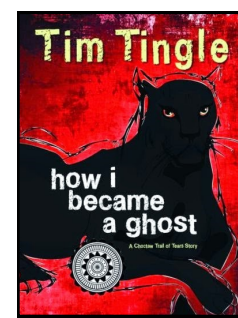
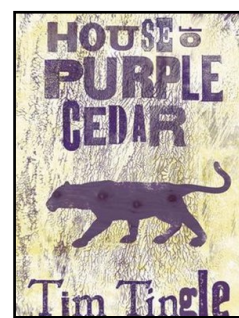
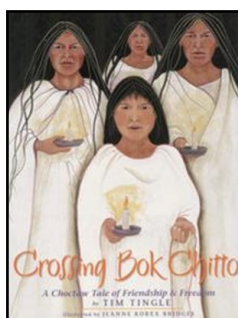
He will also be offering a sectional the afternoon of his Friday morning keynote, the focus of which will be on how to incorporate books about Native Americans into classroom settings.

A second keynote speech is sponsored by MATELA, in coordination with the Montana Writing Project and NCTE, the three associations are honored to welcome Julie Gorlewski and David Gorlewski, current co-editors for NCTE's *English Journal*.

Julie Gorlewski is chair of the Department of Teaching and Learning at Virginia Commonwealth University.



Julie and David Gorlewski



Author Tim Tingle will be MATELA's keynote Oct. 19. Photos from author's website: [timtingle.com](http://timtingle.com)

David Gorlewski works with preservice and practicing teachers and conducts research on literacy and professional dispositions.

## MATELA Membership Form for 2016-2017

Please join/renew by filling out this form, making out a check, and mailing both to MATELA's treasurer at the address on the bottom of this form.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street/Box \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (w) \_\_\_\_\_ (h) \_\_\_\_\_

(c) \_\_\_\_\_

## PLEASE CHECK ONE:

Student membership: \$10 \_\_\_\_\_

Retired membership: \$10 \_\_\_\_\_

Regular yearly membership: \$25 \_\_\_\_\_

Special 3-year membership: \$65 \_\_\_\_\_

Special combined membership (includes MCTM, MSTA) \$51 \_\_\_\_\_

New member: \_\_\_\_\_ Renewal: \_\_\_\_\_

## Mail your check and this form to:

Dana Haring, MATELA Treasurer  
620 First Avenue West, Kalispell, MT 59901

Or sign up online at [www.matelamt.com](http://www.matelamt.com)  
Credit cards accepted online only

## NEWS FROM OPI: Online Professional Learning Communities

**Montana Leverages Power of Internet to Bring Teachers Closer Together****By Christy Mock-Stutz**

Montana is largely a rural state, and as such, has many small schools. Teachers are often the only English teacher in the school, so collaborating and working as a team is a challenge.

In order to offer a solution, Bridgett Paddock and Wendy Tyree of Skyview High School in Billings began hosting on-line meetings the second Wednesday of each month at 3:45 p.m. These are open to all teachers statewide.

After a year, this Professional Learning Community (PLC) has a regular following and is a time of lively discussions, questions and answers. The participants each month include pre-service teachers, new teachers, experienced teachers, professors, and other educators.

Since it is focused on best practices in teaching writing, participants start each discussion writing in a shared document. Sometimes, an article is posted to which participants respond. In other sessions, a question may prompt the writing. Once everyone has contributed to the shared writing document, discussion starts.

Topics have ranged from: *Sharing our Professionalism- NCTE 2016*, where participants shared their highlights from the conference in Atlanta, to *Balancing Teaching and Teaching to the Test*, to *Safe*



*Spaces in Restorative Education* where pre-service teachers asked experienced teachers important questions such as how to create a safe learning environment. These discussions offer practical support to new and experienced teachers alike and bring teachers together from all across the state as they share their expertise.

The PLC is excited to have several guest hosts lined up:

**April 12:** MATELA's own Curt Bobbitt will lead the PLC and discuss *Publications*. Be sure to tune in!

**May 10:** The topic will be *Social Justice and Literacy*, and Park City High School teacher Melissa Horner and MSU Professor Rob Petrone will guest host this session.

**June 14:** Educational Consultant Tammy Elser will guide this discussion.

Recordings are posted on the Teacher Learning Hub, so anyone who missed the online PLC can view the recording.

In addition, teachers earn a renewal unit for each PLC on the site. The Montana online writing PLC provides a space for teachers to meet, discuss professional challenges and celebrations, while growing in their own professionalism.

To view past recordings, and find the link to upcoming live PLC sessions, simply go the Teacher Learning Hub: [opi.mt.gov/learninghu](http://opi.mt.gov/learninghu)

## BIG CHANGES FOR MEJ

**Montana English Journal (MEJ) Moves to Digital Format****By Jessica Gallo**

MATELA is proud to announce that the *Montana English Journal (MEJ)* will be a fully online, open access journal, starting this year.

This new format provides a number of benefits, including wider readership and access, opportunities for the journal to reach new authors, cost savings, and streamlined review and publication processes. The new digital format also means that registered MATELA members will receive email notifications with calls for submissions or when a new issue is published.

For the inaugural online edition, *MEJ* board members welcome articles on all topics related to teaching English language arts in elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as colleges and universities.

The board is particularly interested in articles that highlight the exciting and innovative work teachers are doing in their classrooms and communities. In addition, the journal publishes creative writing.

Teachers are asked to consider submitting original work, including research-related articles; lesson or unit plans; reviews of literary or professional books; and original artwork, prose, poetry, and photography. Submissions are accepted electronically at [www.matelamt.com/publications](http://www.matelamt.com/publications). The deadline is June 1.

With the change in format, the editorial board will also implement changes in the review process. Publishing an article or piece in a state-wide professional journal can be



daunting, but the board believes the review process is a way to provide collegial support and feedback. Authors can look forward to thoughtful reviews that will guide them in their revisions.

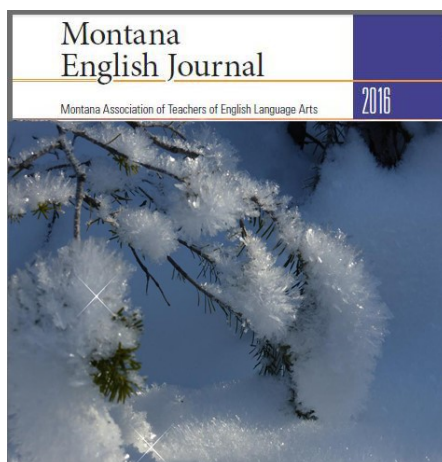
The review process is essential to developing quality articles. To that end, submission will now receive two anonymous reviews. In order to ensure the greatest diversity of ideas and input, the board encourages members to become a reviewer, as well as an author.

Additionally, the editorial staff looks forward to adding regular columns and themes to address the interests of English language arts teachers across Montana. Currently, the board is seeking nominations of Montana ELA educators for an upcoming column called "English Educators in the Treasure State." Nominations, including self-nominations, are accepted at any time.

Finally, the board would like to expand the representation of English educators serving as editorial board members.

MATELA members serving in this capacity play an integral role in shaping the direction and scope of articles included in our journal and provide valuable feedback to prospective authors. If interested, send a letter giving a brief description of your current and past work in English language arts.

To apply for any of the above opportunities, please email your letter of interest to [jessica.gallo@umontana.edu](mailto:jessica.gallo@umontana.edu). The Executive Board of MATELA will consider all applicants. With your scholarship and creativity, *Montana English Journal* will continue to provide English educators in the state with timely, relevant, and engaging content in our new format.

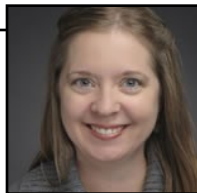




# Yellowstone Writing Project Hosts Summer, Winter Workshops

*New Writing Competition Started in Conjunction with Big Sky County Fair*

By Allison Wynhoff Olsen



The Yellowstone Writing Project (YWP), operated by the Department of English at Montana State University and affiliated with the National Writing Project, offers professional development for Montana teachers across content areas and grade levels.

Each year, YWP hosts summer programming and a mid-winter writing conference, *Fire on the Page!*

At present, the project board is actively involved in a two-year collaboration with Savage Public Schools and is committed to making rural connections across the state.

YWP operates with two primary philosophies that are inherent in all programming. The first is that teachers of writing (teachers who assign writing in their classes) should be writers themselves because only writers understand the experiences and challenges that accompany writing; the second is that, as professionals, teachers should be the driving forces behind academic curricula and professional development. Each year, YWP also hosts summer programming and a mid-winter writing conference *Fire on the Page!*

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The first is that teachers of writing (teachers who assign writing in their classes) should be writers themselves because only writers understand the experiences and challenges that attend writing; the second is that as professionals, teachers should be the driving forces behind academic curricula and professional development.

The YWP site opened in 2009 and since that time has amassed an incredible community of teachers. Current directors are Kirk Branch and Allison Wynhoff Olsen, with Aaron Yost, English teacher at Belgrade High School, serving as co-director. YWP belongs to Montana's statewide, writing project network: Writing Projects Under the Big Sky

This year's summer programming has four main components: summer institute, an advanced institute, a student writing camp and a writing contest.

## Summer Institute

YWP will host an Invitational Summer Institute (ISI).

At present, applications are under review for this summer's ISI. The schedule this year will begin with a two-week, on-campus intensive: June 19-30. Work will continue via online mentoring; the group will reconvene during MEA and the mid-



winter conference, *Fire on the Page!*

## Advanced Institute

YWP will host an Advanced Institute (AI), June 19-23.

Enrollment is open for the week-long AI June 19-23. For more information, interested parties can visit <https://goo.gl/PpFUFZ>

The AI, open to all teacher consultants (across writing projects), will be held on the MSU campus under the theme: Building and Sustaining Writing Communities.

## Youth Writing Camp

YWP will offer its first Youth Writing Camp, July 10-13

Enrollment is open: <http://eu.montana.edu/ywp/> for this multi-day "unschooled" writing workshop for youth entering grades 5-12. The program includes walking field trips, writing games, and guidance and feedback throughout the writing process.

## Writing Competition

YWP will host and judge a state-wide creative writing competition through the Big Sky Country State Fair\*

YWP has formed a new partnership with the Fair and with the Ivan Doig Archive at MSU: [ivandoig.montana.edu](http://ivandoig.montana.edu)

This competition is inspired by the Montana writer Ivan Doig, who told his own story and the story of so many other Montanans with great beauty, honesty, and humor. Teachers are encouraged to submit their work and to share this opportunity with their students and fellow writers.

\*The Competitors' Entry guide is in final development at the time of this submission; details will be published on the fair website: <http://www.406statefair.com>. Until then, here is some essential information:

Prompt: Tell us your Montana story

Poetry: Maximum 300 words

Prose: Maximum 1,500 words

Up to two original photos may be submitted with or as a part of the poem or prose.

Submissions are due July 9.

Contact YWP at [yellowstonewp@gmail.com](mailto:yellowstonewp@gmail.com) with any inquiries, professional development requests, ways to get involved, etc. The website is also a great source of information: <http://www.yellowstonewritingproject.com> or Facebook: Yellowstone Writing Project Group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/354406037965979/> or Twitter: @YellowstoneWP.

# Creative Teaching Ideas Shared at Indian Education for All Best Practices Conference

by Donna L. Miller



Look to the Past—Teach to the Future was the theme for the 11th Annual Indian Education for All (IEFA) Best Practices Conference which took place Feb. 19-21 at the Radisson Colonial Hotel in Helena.



The conference featured 49 breakout sessions, as well as several off-site mini-institutes that required preregistration, where an estimated 300 Montana educators shared ideas and learned from one another about successful classroom instructional practices for implementing IEFA, celebrated the uniqueness of each Montana Indian Tribe, focused on the integration of content standards and IEFA's Essential Understandings, developed cross-cultural relationships, and explored place-based strategies.

One mini-institute occurred at the Holter Museum of Art on Sunday afternoon, where Alaina Buffalo Spirit, a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, spoke about Fort Marion Ledger Art, which tells the stories of warrior life of the Plains Indians.

Her art, too, tells stories, stories of what the women were doing while the men were away, stories of romance or of daily life in Indian camps.

Buffalo Spirit shared a narrative of how art continues to sustain her and to impart healing. She also called art a form of therapy since it provides an outlet for emotion, explaining that under the influence of art, loneliness can subside, pain and grief can ease, and anger can find release.

She also prescribed art as a management tool to calm and settle a distressed or unruly child. After hearing her story, attendees were then allotted time to create a piece of art on authentic ledger paper.

The workshop concluded with a gallery walk of the art produced with a brief narrative shared by each artist.

This power-of-story theme was a common thread throughout the three-days. Among the 21 different workshops offered on Monday

was "Wisdom for All: What Oral History Teaches Now," a sectional in which Jessie Sherman, a teacher with Bozeman School District, and Arleen Adams from the Nkwusm Salish Language Institute shared how oral histories not only foster cross-cultural dialogue but enable students to connect with traditional wisdoms.

"We live the wisdom of sto-

*We live the wisdom of stories; stories help us to order our lives.*

**ARLEEN ADAMS**

*Nkwusm Salish Language Institute*

## Thunder Boy

Loud, imaginative, sad, yet hopeful  
His father's mini-me, Little Thunder, but not so big

Lover of dog tails and garage sales and stars in the sky

Who feels his name is not telling, but smelling; "I hate my name," he keeps yelling.

Who fears being no one and considers all the someones - A name: a boy that's a tough one.

Who gives a whale a pat, dances to the drum - brum brum brum - and rides his bike with all his might.

Who would like to see his name mean something, not just some dumb thing, a representation of everything he loves

Resident of discontent until he realizes what he's meant to be is Lightning Smith

**Lee Vernon, English Teacher  
Stevensville High School**

*Example Thunder Boy Junior bio-poem*

ries; stories help us to order our lives," Adams said.

In "Building Bridges with Cultural Identity Literature," Donna L. Miller, MATELA member and Director of the Teacher Training Program at Aaniiih Nakoda College, shared how educators can facilitate achievement when they link home to school and infuse the curriculum with rich connections to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

"When students see themselves represented in stories, they realize that they matter, that their experiences count," Miller said.

She went on to describe story as a means of connection, of creating opportunities for voice, of preserving history and memory, and of engendering cultural pride.

After examining nine common determinants of culture and hearing a rationale for using cultural identity literature as one

vehicle for welcoming story and for building bridges, workshop partic-

IEFA from Page 8

## Technology Demos Prove Traditional Tools not 'Primitive'

ipants created a word cloud to capture the meaning of culture.

They also wrote bio-poems for Thunder Boy Junior, after listening to Sherman Alexie's first picture book in which Thunder Boy celebrates the power and uniqueness of his name until he learns he was named after his dad (see Inset). Because people call his dad Big Thunder and nickname him Little Thunder, Thunder Boy decides he wants a name that he can call his own, a name that celebrates a personal achievement, a pleasure, a passion, or a pastime. Ultimately, in his name, Thunder Boy finds a connection to his father, his heritage, and himself.

On Monday evening, conference attendees who had preregistered for the mini-institute at the Montana Historical Society Museum walked through four stations to hear stories about traditional and medicinal plants, astronomy, archeology, and ethnotechnology. Ethnotechnology is a term used to describe the study of the technology specific or unique to a cultural group. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the Greek word *ethnos* means "a people, nation, or tribe; a number of people accustomed to living together."

While speaking about traditional tools and artifacts, Tim Ryan, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation, created a fish hook from a sharp, woody thorn of the hawthorn tree, made cordage from dogbane stalks, and demonstrated their use.

He also talked about the utility and functionality of funnel-style-basket fish traps, woven from willow samplings, and described how these traditional methods and materials continue to be used today. His high quality work not only displays the technologies of Native American Indian/First Nation peoples but also proves that Native technologies are not primitive.

The term *primitive technology* carries a prejudicial connotation because it perpetuates the false stereotype that the tools of indigenous peoples can be characterized as simple, crude, or undeveloped. Through his artistry, Ryan revealed that Native American technologies are highly evolved, the product of thousands of years of expertise. There is nothing crude or rudimentary about Ryan's berry basketry or other folded-bark baskets.

Because they require intelligence, practice, skill, patience to be proficient at them, these are clearly difficult techniques to master. Besides the construction of authentic traditional tools and artifacts, Ryan and his company Ethno Tech provide heritage education that is culturally appropriate with relevant curricula.

They also create traveling trunks with a range of traditional materials for museums and schools. Teachers interested in these can contact Ethno Tech or the Montana Historical Society's Education Office by calling 444-4794. The Montana Historical Society's traveling Educational Trunks and Footlockers only cost is UPS shipping to the next booked destination. With the artifacts and teaching materials, teachers can support lessons in archeology, ethnotechnology, and Montana Indian tribes.

Tuesday's breakout sessions continued the story theme when English Teacher Brenda Johnston and Reading Specialist JoAnne Grandstaff, both of Browning High School, presented "Holocaust Education and Indian Education for All," a workshop that drew from Native literature and literature of the Holocaust.

"From these stories, students can apply the Universe of Obligation and the Pyramid of Hate to consider choices made by peo-

ple in the past and apply these strategies to guide their own words and actions for the future," Johnston said.

Telling the story of how learning doesn't just happen in the classroom but on the basketball court or while playing video games, Keynote Speaker LeAnn Montes, an enrolled member of the Chippewa Cree Tribe and direct descendant of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, spoke during Tuesday's luncheon.

Evaluations of the Conference were generally positive, with one participant saying, "I learned some great strategies that I will implement in my classroom that focus on the Essential Understandings. I also appreciate the networking opportunities."



MATELA members Shaylea Tatsey, fifth grade teacher at Sunny-side Intermediate School in Havre; Donna Miller, Director of the Nee-tha-hatsa-nak/Wa'Uspe-Wicakiya Preparation Program at Aaniiih Nakoda College; and Melinda Jones, second grade teacher at Meadowlark Elementary School in Chinook, memorialized their first Indian Education For All Best Practices Conference with this photograph in front of the Blackfoot Tribe's flag.



## A REVIEW OF 'A LIST OF CAGES'

**Emotional Book Deals with an Array of Critical Topics**

by Donna L. Miller

**S**ome books engender an anger and a disgust so intense that readers want to reach inside the pages to yank an abuser right out of a child's life.

*A List of Cages* by Robin Roe

(Disney-Hyperion, 2017) is one of those books. The book's protagonist, Julian, loses his parents in a tragic accident; orphaned, he spends some time in a foster home before his Uncle Russell takes him in. However, Russell is unfit for parenting, abusing Julian emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Roe's book holds potential for opening dialogue about bullying in its multiple forms because it reveals the very real conflict some people experience in their efforts to become an upstander instead of a bystander. Seventeen-year-old Adam Blake is a happy and high-energy senior who has learned to cope with his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).



His friends see Adam's optimism as part of his identity, a reason for his popularity. Because he's strong and confident, Adam makes everyone else feel comfortable too. Despite the perception his friends have of him as "unbreakable," Adam struggles to help Julian, who was once his foster-brother and for whom he feels a protective bond.

Besides being a book that illustrates the effects of abuse, *A List of Cages* is also one that shares the trauma of loss. Julian struggles to live minus his blood. The death of his parents plunges him into a grief so deep that he marvels at his very existence:

It's strange how many ways there are to miss someone. You miss the things they did and who they were, but you also miss who you were to them. The way everything you said and did was beautiful or entertaining or important. How much you mattered. (81)

**Author Robin Roe**

When his parents are gone, Julian no longer feels like he matters: "Because if they aren't there, you aren't either" (81). As time passes and he realizes how even smiles can't be believed, Julian retreats into his thoughts and into his imagination, where the fictional character Elian Mariner sails off on an adventure or saves people—sometimes an entire planet.

On occasions when he can't sleep and he's trying to think good thoughts, Julian imagines a magical place between worlds: "the place in the flash where Elian's ship disappears before it reappears again" (144). In this "invisible place," Julian hopes to see his parents again.

After a series of unfortunate events when Julian is in the hospital, his therapist Delores Carter sagely points out that "people heal a whole lot faster when they're with someone who loves them" (237).

So, this is also a book about love in its multiple forms. Adam not only finds a love that makes him feel giddy, like he has been "injected with caffeine and pixie sticks" (169); he discovers the depth of his desire to save Julian from his abuser.

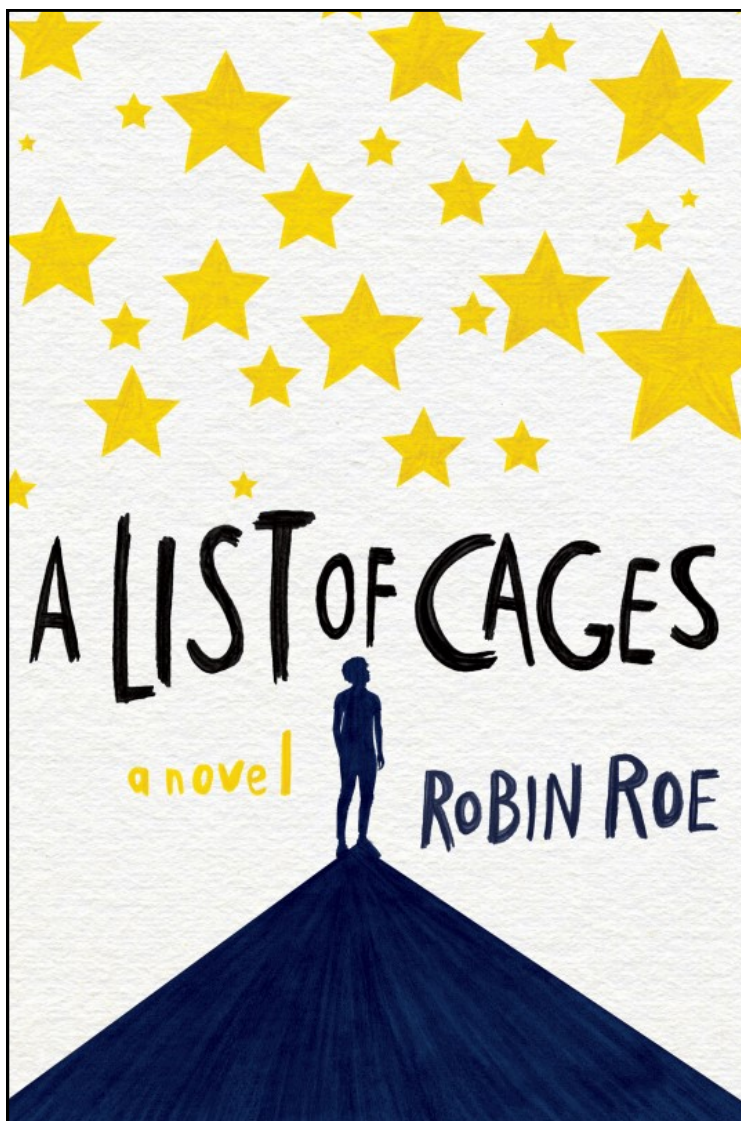
Even Charlie, a brusque and often unhappy young man, surprises readers when his static character turns dynamic.

With *A List of Cages*, Roe builds a heart-rending tale of friendship and human resilience. She invites readers to think about the cages we build, the traps that keep us from living the lives we want.

While some of these cages are imposed on us by others, many of them are self-imposed. We trap ourselves with doubt. We may feel we have no choice, when in reality we may not have fully explored our options or we may be afraid to reach out to others, asking for their help.

Sometimes when these offers for help do come, we might even beg for their silence. Many of us have been taught that struggle builds character or makes us stronger, but Julian's life provides proof that pain prevents growth, too.

Because this book deals with such a wide variety of critical topics, it is a meaningful and important one. It will not only break the reader's heart with its messages about child abuse, trauma, and bullying but also keep it warm with its messages about friendship, love, acceptance, growth, social justice, and the meaning of family.

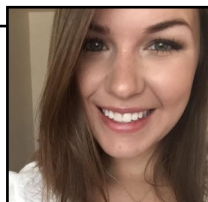


## AN IEFA-ALIGNED 12TH-GRADE UNIT

# Combining Postcolonial, Feminist Lenses to Teach Agency

## 'Silent Seniors' relate to Debra Magpie Earlings' 'Perma Red' novel while studying IEFA

By Catherine Dorian



With movements like NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline) and the Women's March on Washington flooding social media, teaching social justice issues in the secondary classroom is not only timely but also necessary.

Dialogic pedagogies centered on feminism and indigeneity are gaining popularity. Embracing those discussions in a rural Montana English classroom is not only possible but also accessible by teaching one locally-crafted novel that blends female narrative with Montana's own Native history.

A few months ago, I perused my English department's closet stacked with dog-eared crooked-spined literature in search of another novel to give to my "silent seniors." I had nicknamed them, as they had been hesitant to embrace my dialogic model for most of first quarter.

As they slowly emerged into adulthood, I was desperate for something that would make them frustrated enough that they would finally argue with one another about social issues.

I had begun the year with a unit on the Youth Lens, a literary theory Robert Petrone taught in his Literature for Adolescents class at MSU Bozeman. They were just beginning to digest it, and I needed a text about an adolescent that was edgy and provocative.

Stacked in columns on a moveable shelf, the copies of Debra Magpie Earling's *Perma Red* appeared to have been barely touched. As a first-year teacher building new curriculum as I went, I grabbed one copy, read it in the course of a week, and decided that this would be the focus for our next unit.

I figured that teaching an indigenous text would be methodical for me: my minor was in Native American studies; I researched IEFA during my undergraduate studies and presented about it at NCTE; and I live and work in Browning in the summertime, attending ceremonies and immersing as much as I can.

I knew I could blend lessons on assimilation, enculturation, and generational trauma into our discussions on the novel, all

concepts in which I had been trained. I had found a text that was written by a Native author about life on the Flathead and knew that it could cover all seven ELA Essential Understandings.

Beforehand, I had always thought that there was an "ideal" way to teach IEFA, a way that I believed to be more "authentic" because it would focus more on integration of concepts and helping students realize that indigeneity and colonialism have affected every one of us rather than simply selecting a Native text and checking off the box.

I was soon reassured, though, as the discussions that resulted from reading Earling's novel were those which revolved around the central concept of teaching not just IEFA but also English: agency. The discussions broadened students' understanding of both post-colonial literary lenses and feminism, without me having to hand them a reading guide or worksheet.

Set in the town of Perma on the Flathead Indian Reservation, this novel opens the door for teaching postcolonial literary criticism: The main character, Louise, suffers emotional abuse at the government boarding school where she and her classmates are verbally demeaned for being Indian.

Racial tensions among white landowners and the Natives who reside on the Flathead are exemplified through Harvey Stoner, the rich white man who buys up chunks of Native land and imposes himself upon Louise as well. Finally, the importance of land is recognized in this novel, as Louise occasionally leaves the reservation, only to find herself returning home either by conscious choice or circumstance.

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Aside from the post-colonial theory that teaching *Perma Red* allows, reading and discussing Earling's work with seniors in particular presents the opportunity to apply literature to reality. When a colleague of mine saw my seniors carrying around copies of Earling's novel, she expressed both her excitement and apprehension: "I told those seniors that that was a very engaging, but mature book, and that they better be ready to act like grown-ups if they were going to discuss it."

The discussions about sex, consent, promiscuity, and sexual abuse indeed proved the theories that Dr. Robert Petrone had taught me from his Youth Lens research: when teenagers are treated to act with maturity, they oftentimes rise to the occasion.

My students were instantly struck by Louise, who is most often spoken about rather than heard from. With the fateful beginning of Louise's relationship with Baptiste Yellow Knife, whose pride in being Native pushes against what Louise and her classmates are taught at school, the novel kicks off a discussion about how young women can be sexualized and dominated by society.

Charlie Kicking Woman, a tribal officer who, while demonstrating compassion toward Louise by repeatedly helping her out

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## Students Grapple with Complex Concept of Stolen Agency as It Applies to Native Peoples

of sticky situations, begins assessing her appearance when she is only 11. Baptiste's attraction to Louise is also paired with scenes of his tendency to abuse her when drunk, even urinating a circle around her one night in the fields behind her grandmother's house as if to say, "You are my territory."

By close-reading some of the scenes in which Louise and Baptiste have sexual encounters, my seniors were sparked to discuss the meaning of consent.

One student remarked: "We know that when someone says no or yes, the answer should be obvious. What does it mean," this student asked, "when someone, like Louise, doesn't say anything at all?"

It was thus that we began an authentic conversation about agency that had culminated from the pure thoughts of students in the classroom.

Void of a reading guide with a cookie-cutter definition of agency, my students were able to form their own ideas as to what this concept meant in the most authentic way that I could have hoped: Perma Red had applied the idea of agency to the real world in a way to which students could debate and relate.

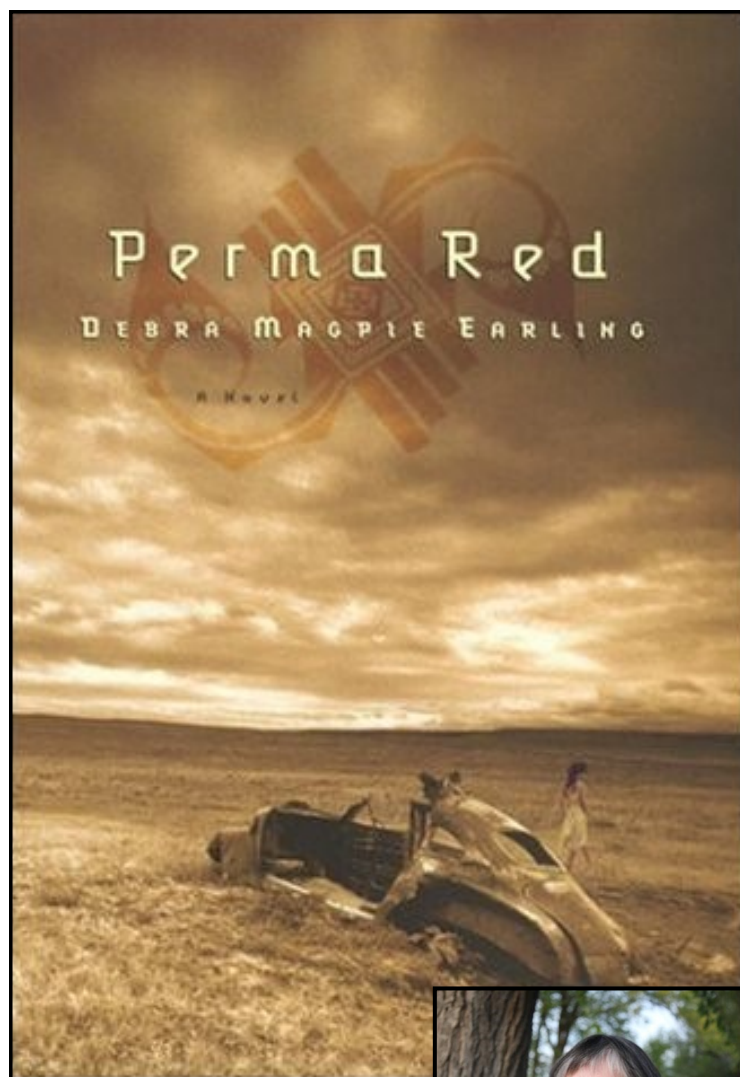
Reading Earling's Perma Red began as a way to integrate historical and postcolonial literary criticisms into my senior curriculum and morphed into a profound discussion on slut-shaming and choice.

Students spent most of our class time debating the candid, though necessary question (and I apologize if this language offends readers, but I am a firm believer in speaking the language which students speak): "Is Louise a slut?" The students never reached a consensus, mainly because the novel was written so brilliantly.

Ultimately, this novel helped my seniors grasp the concept that agency, while it may be robbed from us in various ways and has been particularly taken from indigenous popula-

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Fort Benton Teacher



**Debra Magpie Earling**

tions, is a complex concept that humans exhibit in different ways.

After being dubbed "Perma Red" by those in her community ("Red" because she is seen as promiscuous), Louise's identity is decided for her rather than by her.

One of the seniors even opined one day: "She's been sexualized since she was a child: she does act promiscuously, but she is also just a product of her upbringing."

It was then that I knew that that particular student had finally understood one of the central concepts that both feminist and postcolonial literary criticism so greatly emphasize: that oftentimes, and especially for marginalized groups of people, society more often determines their identity for them rather than the opposite.

What began as an attempt to integrate IEFA into a unit turned into something much more authentic: students embraced the idea of agency and found ways to relate to Louise, reflecting on how our environment can determine our identity for us, robbing us of the right to self-determine.

Reading Earling's novel taught students what it means to have agency stolen from them and the process of gaining it back, a task with which those of the NoDAPL and the Women's March on Washington movements are currently grappling.



